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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking needs to be incorporated into composition instruction to compel students to question the text, the topic, and the teacher so that they will be better prepared to perform writing tasks in content areas. The analytic skills of revision and coherence are the most troublesome for the basic writer. Providing the student with models of the analytic approach to analyzing text, demonstrating through exercises the benefit of revision, and providing exercises to demonstrate and improve the coherence of a passage of text will aid the basic writer in developing such skills. (RS)

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ABSTRACT

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CRITICAL THINKING IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASSROOM

Time constraints and the preoccupation with surface correctness in the Basic Writing course have generally precluded sustained attention to instruction in critical thinking skills. As a result, many Basic Writing students have difficulty meeting the rigorous writing requirements of their credit level courses such as essay examination questions, laboratory reports or library papers. These composition tasks demand a degree of autonomy in organizing material and expressing complex ideas which the Basic Writing student does not, typically, possess.

In contrast to the traditional Basic Writing class, which is instructor-centered and does not encourage students to question the text, the topic or the teacher, the critical thinking mode allows, and indeed, compels, students to question all of these. Our presentation addresses the need for incorporating critical thinking skills in composition instruction and details a variety of methods by which informed opinion, logical reasoning and original and insightful ideas become the basis for essay composition at the Basic Writing level.

Our presentation is divided in three parts. The first deals with the creation of conditions in the Basic Writing course that are conducive to the development of critical thinking skills. Strategies for generating student inquiry about topics and texts, different levels of question types and the role of structured discussion will be presented here.

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The second part deals with the application of critical thinking skills to reading selections across the curriculum. A critical thinking approach to vocabulary development, mapping reading passages for summarization and strategies for responding critically to a written text comprises this section of the presentation.

The third portion of the presentation offers methods by which students can apply their critical thinking skills to their own writing of summaries and arguments. It stresses the coherence of written expression through paragraph development and the use of signal expressions, repetition of key concepts and paraphrasing.

Our integrated critical thinking, reading and writing approach aims to bring students to the point where they perceive their writing as a response to questions about a content base or a composition prompt. Handouts on all three aspects of the presentation will be included.

Analytic Thinking in the Basic Writing Classroom, Joan Gregg

Analytic thinking in the Basic Writing classroom takes place on both sides of the writing process. Heuristic techniques, particularly for personal writing, have received a great deal of attention recently. Journal keeping, application of the newspaper writer's five questions, double entry responses to text and similar methods provide approaches to a topic that have proven useful to unpracticed writers seeking to elaborate subjects for essays. Analytic prewriting strategies such as those discussed by Professor Barbanel address one part of the basic writer's problem.

A second aspect of the basic writer's problem, however, is the analytic approach to evaluating and revising the first draft. The basic writer, even in collaboration with other basic writers, often cannot discern the deficiencies of his or her text in expressing and developing the subject of his or her written work. Unstructured peer or group work based on such vague or subjective questions as "State three things you liked best about the essay" or "Mark the parts of the essay about which you would like to know more" often frustrates the peer reader who doesn't know enough about what a finished, fully elaborated text should look like to get a handle what revisions to suggest. Not knowing what questions the competent reader/writer would ask about a given text handicaps the basic writing student who is thrust into collaborative revision. Providing the basic writing student with models of the analytic approach to a text is a useful complement to prewriting work and to the revision of one's own text.

The word analysis derives from the Greek prefix and stem meaning "to unloosen a knot." The types of exercises presented below offer some models to instruct students in how to assess text and gain an understanding of how texts are put together that they can apply to the revision of their own and their peers' written work. (All exercises are from Communication and Culture: A Reading-Writing Text, 2nd edition, Joan Gregg, Wadsworth Publishing Company.) These exercises focus on the development of the principle of Coherence, the logical sequencing of statements and the appropriate linking of thought relationships both within and between sentences. Coherence is one of the most important, yet most difficult analytic skills for basic writing students to master. Principles of coherence include the logical development of an idea from a general statement through the elaboration of its details, the linking of exemplification to assertions, the repetition of key words and synonyms for topic and control terms, and the explicit use of signal expressions.

The attached chart of signal expressions is given to students at the beginning of the semester and serves as a reference sheet for all work on coherence.

1. Students are presented with a paragraph with numbered sentences for convenient reference. After having identified the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph, they are asked to respond to such questions as the following:

a. What key word in sentence 2 is repeated in sentence 3? What thought relationship is signalled by the expression "therefore" in sentence 3?

b. The expression "such as" in sentence 5 introduces examples of a noun. Which noun in the sentence is being exemplified?

. . . . c. What is the function of sentence 7: to repeat a key term from sentence 3/to reverse a viewpoint in sentence 4/to illustratate the concept of "suitability" from sentence 6?

2. Students are provided with a scrambled paragraph. They must put the sentences in appropriate order, using the repetition of key words and signal expressions as a guide. Any irrelevant sentences must be eliminated. Following the exercise, the instructor reviews the sequencing, asking students to account for the thought relationships between each sentence.

3. Students are instructed in the principles of summarization with the focus on reducing text without losing essential informtion. Such syntactical structures as the adjective clause, appositive phrases, and parallel items in a series are reviewed. Students are then provided with summary pieces to revise based on the principles of coherence and the specific syntactic structures which they have reviewed.

4. Students are provided with an extended paragraph describing a scientific experiment. After a discussion on the aspects of hypothesis, experiment and results/conclusion basic to the scientific method, students are asked to divide the single paragraph into three separate paragraphs, each dealing with one of the three aspects. Focus is directed to chronological order in the experiment part by having students note signal words of time order. Students are asked to find other expressions signalling additional thought relationships and explain the connections they make between clauses or sentences.

5. Students are given an unadapted paragraph with signal expressions deleted. Using their Signal Expression sheet as a reference, they must insert signal expressions, appropriate in form and meaning where needed.